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THE 'RED CROSS' CONCENTRATION CAMP IN NIŠ, SERBIA

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I have come to Serbia at the invitation of the British Council. Somehow, amidst the frantic programme, I find myself in Niš, after a talk at the University, with an afternoon to explore, and an amiable companion, Bojana, a recent graduate in English, to act both as interpreter and imparter of local knowledge.

I had read about the Crveni Krst Concentration Camp in one of many works¹ I studied in a tangential research foray beyond my original field of interest which was Rebecca West's *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*² and Yugoslavia both before and during the war. The name itself is intriguing. Translated from Serbian it means Red Cross Concentration Camp, a contradictory title that somehow belies the stark facts of the place and its history.

Kenrick and Puxon's history of the Roma during the war details how the first inmates of the camp, when it was newly created in 1941, were the Roma.³ Having worked with the Roma for years, this fact alone would have driven me to make the trip, a pilgrimage of sorts, to see the place.

When I suggest the possibility to Bojana, she surprises me. She is a local girl; her best friend is Jewish, and yet, she has never been. I ask if she wants to accompany me or not, reasoning that if she has not been before, she probably has good reason, and may be loath to do so now. In fact she is eager to. Her Jewish friend, now living in Israel, has written recently to say that her biggest regret is that she never visited it while she was growing up in Niš. Bojana will come with me and then she will write to her friend about her experience.

¹ Mojzes (2011).

² West (1941).

³ Kenrick and Puxon (2009), pp. 80–1.



Crveni Krst Concentration Camp today.



It is situated in the middle of a housing estate, not an easy place to find. Bojana says the area is a rough one and it is better not to be caught there after dark, especially because I am foreign and not likely to be a welcome visitor. We approach the camp across a waste ground, muddy from the recent rain, and tufted with weeds. The barbed wire perimeter wall, the approach itself, makes both Bojana and me fall silent.

The site includes two long buildings, a watchtower, a memorial statue of a girl reading a book and a kiosk where we pay a paltry entrance fee and are given a guide pamphlet in Serbian. One of the blocks is now toilets and offices; this is where the Gestapo were housed. The other is where the prisoners were held. It is tiny. It is the first thing I think and I cannot get over it the whole time I am there. During the course of the war, 35,000 people were held there and while records vary our booklet suggests that 10,000 of them were shot.⁴ Hundreds of people were incarcerated at the same time and it is almost unfathomable to me how it could be so. It had originally been intended as a transit camp and that, at least, I can picture, close to a railway station, a waiting area, a kind of purgatory between normal day-to-day living and the hell of the gas vans and crematoria. But it did not remain so, and in the end housed many more people than it had been intended for. Many of those never made it across Europe, but instead lie in mass graves a few kilometres away on a green hillside, strewn with litter and marked by clenched fist memorials covered in graffiti.

The Gestapo established the camp in 1941, naming it with grim irony after a nearby Red Cross facility. In September that year Romani men, women and children were brought to it. The following month between 200 and 300 Jewish people, both local and from around the country, joined them. It was not until mid-November that they started systematically killing the adult men. I think of those first family groups with their shaven heads; the Gestapo had shaved the heads of all the Roma in Niš before the camp was established, claiming it was to get rid of lice. They would have worn yellow armbands, compulsory by law, with the word *Zigeuner* (Gypsy) written across them. The woman at the entrance kiosk tells us that those first Roma prisoners were kept together, men, women and children, not segregated by gender as other, later groups of detainees were. She says they screamed and protested so much at being parted from their families, that it was easier just to keep them together, even if they were an affront to their jailer's sense of order.

Unlike other camps that I have visited, this one has no queues. In fact, for much of the time we are there, there are no other visitors at all. The text is all in Cyrillic and I am grateful to Bojana for her translations. Few camps survived at all. Most countries are keen to obliterate these remnants of the past, but Crveni Krst held many partisans and communists, and so, I reason, Tito's Yugoslavia⁵ might have regarded it as a monument and memorial to its political victims.

⁴The entry Crveni Krst Concentration Camp Museum in the Information Portal to European Sites of Remembrance states that 2,000 people were killed, but that other records suggest it might have been as many as 12,000. See <http://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/denkmaeler/view/1302/Crveni-Krst-Concentration-Camp-Museum> (accessed 29 September 2014).

⁵Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), General Secretary (later Chairman of the Presidium) of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (1939–80), leader of the Yugoslav anti-Nazi guerrilla movement, the Partisans (1941–45), Prime Minister (1944–63) and President (later President for Life) (1953–80) of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The block that once held prisoners has three levels. On the ground floor is just a low lying trough covered with straw which was a bed for the male inmates. Black and white photographs of some of the people who have died there, hang on the walls above them. Many of these photographs have been taken before the war and they carry the ghost of their subject's past happiness in posed smiles and relaxed expressions.

There is a case with the blue and white striped pyjamas and cap, now an iconic thing that was worn by all inmates. I think of the top that the clothing shop Zara recently designed and put on sale for children with its blue stripes and yellow star, and how they had to withdraw it because it was so reminiscent of this.⁶ I consider a world that seems to forget too soon.

There is a special group of photographs. They are the people who died in the great escape of 1942. There were actually two escapes from this camp. In January 1941, in thick snow and bitter temperatures, a group of Serbian partisans stormed the camp and managed to free a handful of Jewish prisoners. A month later, the inmates themselves rebelled, a desperate attempt to escape the mass executions that now occurred regularly on nearby Mount Bubanj. 174 people did escape, but 42 did not.⁷ And in some cases, the display informs us, those who did had to climb over the bodies of those hanging from the barbed wire. The wall that was there had been built as a response to this break out; there had been only barbed wire before. But it is the fleeing escapees, I imagine, in the snow, with their thin, striped pyjamas, their perilous journeys to safety. I wonder how many truly escaped.

Afterwards there were more mass shootings on the hill; all of the Jewish men that remained were murdered. Romani prisoners were forced at gun point to dig the trenches that would be their graves and then, too, were shot. In less than a month 850 people were killed and buried on Bubanj Hill.⁸

The second floor of the hut is where the women and younger children were held. Many of them were taken from Niš in the spring of 1942, transported from the nearby rail station to Sajmiste Camp on the outskirts of Belgrade, where they were gassed in vans, a mobile precursor to the gas chambers that would be set up around Europe. The photographs are there too, black and white, with hair that had been so touchingly, carefully arranged for the photographer, and lipstick meticulously applied. They include that of Jelena Glavaški, who is remembered in Israel, her story told in Yad Vashem's Righteous Among The Nations.⁹ Jelena was a primary school teacher in a suburb of Niš who hid her Jewish friend's daughter Jennie in her attic. They were betrayed by a neighbour posing as a partisan and held in Crveni Krst. The teenage girl was tortured before being transferred to a German labour camp while Jelena was executed on the hill. When Jennie returned to Serbia in 1945, she commemorated the woman who had saved her.

⁶ 'Zara Apologizes For Pajamas That Look Just Like A Concentration Camp Uniform', *The Huffington Post*, 27 August 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/27/zara-anti-semitism_n_5722162.html (accessed 29 September 2014).

⁷ See the entry Crveni Krst Concentration Camp Museum in the Information Portal to European Sites of Remembrance, <http://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/denkmaeler/view/1302/Crveni-Krst-Concentration-Camp-Museum> (accessed 29 September 2014).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See 'The Righteous Among The Nations', <http://db.yadvashem.org/righteous/search.html?language=en> (accessed 29 September 2014).

It is a single story, an individual narrative in a tangled ball of thread of many such accounts, some visible, some hidden, but in this place, it has the sensation of being personal, of being about not just the teacher hiding her former student, but of the person who betrayed her. In a country that has the rise and fall of treachery and distrust written into its common past as all of former Yugoslavia does, it was impossible not to think of contemporary re-enactments.

I am moved, we both are, but then we are jarred by the grim reality of the top floor. There is a palpable atmosphere here and it catches us. It is a ridiculous, superstitious thing, but I am afraid. Solitary cells, with tiny metal periscopes pointing upwards, their only source of light and ventilation. Metal to bring the heat of scorching Serbian summers to the people confined there, heat that was exacerbated by salty food and water deprivation. The reconstruction is partial, and, rightly, nothing has been done to alleviate the claustrophobic awfulness of the spaces. Where there is graffiti, sometimes written in blood, because to have a pen of any kind was punishable by death, a Perspex panel protects it. Tiny crumbled holes on cell walls tell of fraught attempts to communicate with other prisoners. Most chilling of all, in some cells, barbed wire lies half uncoiled on the floor, a vicious snake waiting to take those who, too weary to stand any longer, collapse to the floor exhausted.

And then Bojana surprises me again. 'These are the ones I've heard about' she says. 'They were used again, you know, after the war.'

I think of Tito's Yugoslavia and how this whole trip I have been struggling to reconcile my reading of the punishments and torture for dissent to the almost hagiographic devotion his rule seemed to inspire in so many of the Serbians I meet.

'There are no records, of course,' she says. 'My parents remember though, for more than a decade. It's where they brought those who didn't agree.'

Then and there, I have no way of knowing if it is true but it does not seem improbable that records of atrocities be lost after civil war leaving only collective memories of the shared experience; the witnessing of the time. Perhaps these rooms are a legacy of our ability to forget and so repeat, or of our inability to learn. But they are not the only vestige of the past. In a café, later that day, I find another, far more awful one. The man serving me coffee in the cheerful, brightly decorated establishment is young and speaks good English. He asks where I have spent the day. I tell him about the camp and he becomes quite animated, speaks eloquently about the importance of remembering the past.

'It could all happen again,' he warns. 'Slaughtering innocents, ethnic cleansing.'

I nod.

But then he adds, 'The Gypsies, the ones who buried those poor people up on the hillside, they're still here, filthy, breeding too much, we've done nothing to get rid of them.'

This then was a true Holocaust relic and an awful thing. He spoke of the camp with a mix of reverence, for those who had escaped and defied its threat, sadness for those who had died there, but poignantly, terribly, with hate too, for the beleaguered Roma, the *Zigeuner*, who had buried the Yugoslav dead and were still, tragically, to be forgotten as victims, but rather reviled and remembered for their helpless complicity.

Further Reading

Kenrick, Donald and Puxon, Grattan (2009). *Gypsies Under the Swastika*. Revised and updated edition. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

Mojzes, Paul (2011). *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the 20th Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

West, Rebecca (1941). *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*. New York: The Viking Press.